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SUBJECT: SENATOR CORKER SURVEYS DAMAGE IN GORI

REF: SBU - NOT FOR INTERNET DISTRIBUTION

1. (SBU) Senator Robert Corker (R-TN) traveled to Gori August 30, visiting an IDP center and meeting with various GOG officials to survey damage and assess the impact of the Russian invasion and occupation of Georgia. Governor Lado Vardzelashvili explained that the resettlement of Gori is on schedule to be completed before the winter. (Note: Current GOG estimates are that 90% of the roughly 90,000 IDPs from the Gori area have returned). Governor Vardzelashvili gave Senator Corker a personal tour of the damage done by Russian forces. Local residents explained that air strikes damaged some residential buildings at a time when no Georgian forces were in the area. One resident showed Senator Corker a small shed that housed all of his remaining belongings that the Russian and irregular forces did not steal during the occupation. Residents shared with Senator Corker stories of drunk Russian soldiers demanding vodka from them and looting everything they could carry. Scores of volunteers were seen at various sites in the city repairing damage caused by Russian forces and hauling away debris.

2. (SBU) Governor Vardzelashvili explained that although Gori was relatively safe and secure, some surrounding villages were inaccessible to returning residents, and the threat of paramilitary action was still very real. Vardzelashvili was confident that IDPs returning to the city would quickly resume life as normal despite some heavy personal property losses. Businesses are reopening and commercial activity is apparent although it will take time to return to the pre-conflict status quo. Senator Corker's visit to a local school that is housing IDPs showed it to be well run; efficiently distributing USAID assistance to the local community at large. IDPs explained the hardships they faced due to the Russian invasion, but expressed an optimism that they would soon be able to return to their villages. Senator Corker had an opportunity to address international and local press outside the shelter; in his remarks, the Senator highlighted the strong U.S. support for Georgia and for Georgia's democratically-elected government.

3. (SBU) In Tbilisi, Senator Corker met with various GOG officials. President Saakashvili explained Russian actions and intent from the Georgian point of view both locally and geopolitically. Saakashvili praised U.S. support during the crisis and implored Sen. Corker to support a robust economic assistance package. PM Gurgenedze presented an overview of his economic proposal (details to be reported septel). PM Gurgenedze stated that the GOG has been remarkably resilient and argued that it would remain so barring an economic meltdown. Deputy Speaker of Parliament Tsereteli concurred with the PM's assessment and urged U.S. support for NATO MAP and a large economic aid package. Tsereteli opined that a strong American response would ensure Russia would not be able to bring about regime change in Georgia. Tsereteli noted wryly that maybe now Europe would take Georgian warnings about Russia's intentions seriously. Parliamentarians Petre Tsiskarishvili (Majority Leader), Lasha Zhvania (Foreign Affairs Chair) and Akakiy Minashvili

(Deputy Chairman of Legal Committee) all stressed to Senator Corker that Russia cannot be allowed to force regime change. They explained how far Georgia had come since 2004 as a virtual failed state to a country on the cusp of catching up with Romania and Bulgaria economically. All stressed Georgia's solid foundation both economically and politically, but also asked for Senator Corker's support for the PM's economic requests.

¶4. (U) Senator Corker did not have an opportunity to clear this cable prior to his departure from Tbilisi.

TEFFT